

Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1910

Dianne Lawrence. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2012. 262pp.
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In Dianne Lawrence's engaging new book, one example of colonial dress neatly illustrates her argument that the performance of feminine gentility was intrinsically determined by place and circumstance. In the social milieu of the mining communities of 1840s Van Diemen's Land, Mrs Allport "wrote of having to wear prints 'which ladies must be contented to wear now, if they would be distinguished from the *slumocracy*'" (44). Genteel dress may have been inspired by the fashions of the metropolis, but for Mrs Allport and her peers it was equally determined by their reaction against the lavish clothing of the diggers' wives—women who were performing their own newfound wealth through the purchase of bright yellow satin.

Restrained dress becomes here the marker of taste and social standing, but in recognising that the "ladies" conspicuously purchased modest fabric, Lawrence moves away from previous assessments of status in colonial societies which dismiss the importance of fashion and material culture. Instead, she argues that colonial women's "desire, indeed the profound psychological need, to be at ease in one's surroundings" (2) demands a consideration of the signifying purpose and provenance of the things they left behind. Objects had the potential to symbolise not only home and loved ones in Britain, but also new lives and status in a new society. Far more than a mere matter of bonnets, or well-bred women "replicating a notion of Britishness" (63), *Genteel Women* explores how the Victorian fixation with objects and status is essential to understanding how women refashioned themselves and their notions of gentility for the ever-changing environments of the British colonial world.

The study is very indebted to the cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu, but Lawrence's critical approach is based on Daniel Miller's discussion of "the materiality of object and the materiality of the space wherein the object is sited" (9). Coupled with this is Lawrence's assertion of the enduring value of gentility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its "currency over the English-speaking world" (5). She observes that any study which seeks "to make the case for a global gentility effectively loses sight of localised adaptations" (74). Refuting the notion that colonial gentility had but one form of material expression, Lawrence analyses the domestic and consumer activities of genteel women in Australia, India, South Africa, West Africa, and Aotearoa/New Zealand from 1840 to 1910, tracking the location-specific practice and performance of their status. Put simply, what expressed gentility in India might not be appropriate for Tasmania.

Lawrence has consulted an impressive array of resources from private letters, diaries and record books, to newspapers, shipping inventories and trade directories, as well as museum artefacts and photographs. The book is divided into separate studies on dress, the living room, and gardens, as well as food and household management. The highly delineated structure at times reveals something of its previous existence as a doctoral thesis, but Lawrence maintains the thread of her argument by returning to several of the women throughout the book—we later see Mrs Allport stuffing porcupine with sage and onions (218). Just as circumstances varied, so did individual women's responses to the sundry requirements of domestic life. From the need in tropical climates to incorporate high vaulted ceilings and verandahs into living rooms, and where supplies were limited by distance and intermittent shipping, to unpick and remake dresses sometimes decades after their first use, Lawrence shows that the performance of gentility was a dynamic and often very intimate process. Bodies, homes,

gardens, and even dining tables became material sites for expressing individuality, eclecticism, and cultural hybridity.

Lawrence also rejects a position she sees in many Australasian studies that generalises “women’s preoccupation with the detail of refined domesticity as being incompatible with notions of egalitarianism” (74). She convincingly posits in the chapters on the living room and household management that genteel women were at the centre of colonial social development, be it positive or negative. Their social influence extended beyond the family and servants, to the wider settler communities, and interaction with indigenous people. Similarly, Lawrence argues that their engagement with the business of materiality gave genteel woman an active role in colonial commerce. Through the diverse examples of how women purchased fashionable clothing, home decor, and foodstuffs, as well as their participation in the “circularity of plant sourcing” from the metropolis of London, through the Cape, Australasia, and back again to Britain (156), Lawrence offers the beginnings for many more studies on the material and market influence of the colonial lady of the house.

If there is one criticism to make of the work, Lawrence sometimes appears to be justifying the study of material culture, rather than positioning her research within a greater critical discussion of its relationship to the metropolitan centre and the Empire. Her challenge to “the notion of a dichotomy between ‘home’ and ‘away’, mobility versus fixedness” (235) could have been developed with James Belich’s recent work on the settler revolution. Furthermore, some consideration of recent literary studies on cultural portability would have served Lawrence’s theoretical approach well. For instance, John Plotz’s *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (2008), which asks how “portability emerged as a new way of imagining community, national identity, and even liberal selfhood” in the process of emigration from Britain to the colonies (xiii-xiv), has obvious parallels with this study. Similarly, *Genteel Women* is an important social history counterpart to research such as Janet C Meyer’s *Antipodal England: Emigration and Portable Domesticity in the Victorian Imagination* (2009).

Genteel Women opens up a vast wealth of resources for scholars researching status, women, and cultural influence in the nineteenth century. Lawrence has compellingly rearticulated the need to view the genteel colonial woman as more than a passive participant or witness to masculine endeavour, and the breadth of this study reveals that there is plenty more work to be done on addressing the extent—“for good or for ill” (238)—of women’s agency in the imperial project.

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